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ABSTRACT

The question of where the line is often arises as tutors attempt to confine their tutoring within ethical boundaries suggested by the line image. On the surface, some issues look easy. To the question of whether tutors should offer advice on take-home test writing assignments, most writing center personnel would probably respond with "absolutely not." However, in-class and take-home tests are not the same. There are no set answers to these and other issues. Each writing center functions within a special academic and political context and must address these contexts as it defines its role and policies. The professional staff at the Sheekey Writing Center at La Salle University offers help on grammar, mechanics, sentence structure (but not on the ideas expressed) in take-home test assignments only after the teacher agrees. A panic-stricken student faced with a poem explication assignment proved a more difficult challenge. A combination of questions, modeling, mirroring, and hints enabled the student to break through his mental block. Tutors at the center inform students about the nature of plagiarism and the gravity of the offense. Even mundane policies should reflect a writing center's philosophy. Policies should be deliberate and purposeful and not the result of tradition or conformity to some abstract ideal. (RS)

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# Where Is the Line?
## How Ethical Questions Reflect a Writing Center's Philosophy

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For writing centers and those who work in them, the question of "where is the line?" often arises as tutors attempt to confine their tutoring within ethical boundaries suggested by the line image. Ethically, while that line may seem to be straight and clear, in reality the dimensional qualities of the line imagery should warn us that things are rarely as simple as they appear. If you're not completely convinced of the multiple realities a line can suggest, take another look at the work of the cubist painters. In the face of this complexity, then, deciding which reality to emphasize (or put in a writing center context, which ethical policy to pursue) is a decision writing centers continually face. A host of issues are involved here that have to do with how a writing center defines itself and its services as well as with the relationships that develop among the center's tutors and its users, such as tutor-tutee, tutor-teacher, tutor-tutee-teacher, to name a few.

For a writing tutor, the question "where is the line?" elicits an immediate reaction concerning the ethical issue of how much help a tutor should offer a tutee. Intellectual integrity is crucial, and as Beverly Lyons Clark emphasizes, tutors have a responsibility to both the tutee and the academic community to ensure that plagiarism does not occur. However, even though everyone is in broad agreement that plagiarism is unethical, the problem of what constitutes plagiarism is slipperier than we (teachers) admit to our students. Here Clark offers an example that illuminates the complexity of this problem. She describes the case of a Wheaton tutor who turned to her school's honor code for guidance about plagiarism and decided, on the basis of the code's strictures, that "'all work for which a student receives credit be solely the result of her own effort'" (5-6). Under this scenario, a tutor could help correct errors in an as-yet-ungraded paper but could not offer, even in a limited way, words or phrases, let alone ideas. Unfortunately, this restriction ignores the collaborative nature of tutoring and learning, the processes involved in problem solving, the bedeviling subtleties surrounding plagiarism, and the way a writing center may define its mission.

On the surface, some issues look easy. To the question of whether tutors should offer writing advice on take-home test writing assignments, I suspect most writing center personnel would automatically respond, as one of the teachers in our center did, with "absolutely not." For that teacher, a take-home test is bound by the same conventions as an in-class test. However, a take-home test and in-class test *aren't* the same. [Teacher view] A major difference is that a take-home test is designed to allow a student to ponder the material, marshall information, and have the time--even if limited--to craft thoughtful and well-written responses in a way that is not possible under the time constraints imposed by in-class testing. The teachers' expectations about the written quality of take-home tests are also different. Furthermore, students do not see take-home and in-class tests as the same either. [Tutor view] The teacher is concerned with how the answer is presented as much as what the answer is. Most of my professors enforce a no-collaboration rule, stressing that students are not to work together on the answers to the questions, but are free to discuss the questions themselves. I view take-home tests as an objective essay, so it would only be logical that most students would be concerned about the quality of their writing, not with merely answering the test questions. Seeking help at a writing center is not a violation of the honor code, but rather a valuable learning experience which would enable a student to improve the expression of the answer to the particular question. My peers visit the Sheekey Writing Center for many reasons, sometimes just to clarify a particular assignment, or just to borrow the eyes and ears of a "friendly reader" to check for proofreading errors. Through my experiences as a peer tutor, I clearly see the value of giving grammatical and structural aid to a fellow student concerning a take-

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home examination. As long as content is not discussed, it is not a violation of the "no-collaboration" rule. By coming to the writing center with take-home tests, students learn to see the value of polishing all writing, not just for a specific composition or essay assignment.

Given all of this, what should a writing center's policy be if a student comes seeking writing advice about a take-home examination? The politically safe stance to take, of course, would be a "hands-off" policy. While this policy is safe, it ignores the intent of and perceptions about such tests and ignores the needs of ESL students. To further compound the problem, if a writing center makes an exception for ESL students in such a situation, is it ethical to deny this same help to native speakers?

Ultimately, writing center policy concerning take-home tests must reflect the role each center defines for itself. But this is not the only instance in which the boundaries of what constitutes plagiarism are unclear. Is it ethical, for example, for a tutor to help when the assignment requires a student to demonstrate knowledge drawn from class and not from outside sources, including people? In the abstract, the answer probably seems obvious, but again, real life isn't so simple. What should a tutor do in the case of a student who is thoroughly intimidated by poetry and comes to the writing center with an explication assignment which consists of a poem stripped of title and author to ensure that students discover their own insights?

The situations just mentioned deal with a tutor's actions, but ethical dilemmas can also arise from what a tutor knows about tutees and their work. Overheard conversations in a writing center and knowledge about voice and quality fluctuations in a student's paper can make tutors long for the bliss found in ignorance. It is possible, for example, to work with one student, listen to the cadence and phrasing of a paper, and overhear later what sound to be identical phrasings and rhythms in bits of conversation and spoken sentences that drift in from other tutoring sessions dealing with the same assignment. Tutors are also in an ideal position to recognize marked vacillation in a paper's voice, such as all those too familiar cases in which a paper that is hesitant and mundane shifts suddenly to assured and erudite. What is a tutor to do who wishes to uphold standards of intellectual integrity yet who wishes to respect the privacy of tutoring sessions? What is the tutor's responsibility in such cases?

To these issues, I argue, there are no set answers. Each writing center functions within a special academic and political context so that each center must address these contexts as it defines its role and its policies. I can tell you what the Sheekey Writing Center has decided, but even our decisions are not seen as cast in concrete. With regard to take-home tests, we have devised a policy whereby we will offer advice on matters such as grammar, mechanics, sentence structure, and organization but not on the ideas expressed. However, in such situations we will offer guidance only after a student has obtained express permission from the teacher that such help is permissible, and help is received from professional members of the writing center staff. For us, this means it is possible for ESL students to get the extra help and experience they need. A better policy, however, would be one established after canvassing the faculty's views on the matter, perhaps even to the point of having consent forms on file from individual teachers. This could, however, be an administrative nightmare as well. As for the issue of peer tutors working with students on take-home examinations, it is plagued by many pit-falls. Peer tutors are placed in a compromising situation when they are asked to review a take-home examination. If the peer tutors have already taken the course or the instructor, the tutors may unconsciously and inadvertently offer too much help to students by way of commenting on content or by making suggestions to change the style to something which the professor prefers. On the other hand, if the peer tutors have not taken the course yet, they may be receiving a "preview" of a future examination which the tutors may find themselves taking if they decide to enroll in the course. The Sheekey Writing Center has recently decided to allow only faculty members to work with students on take-home examinations, thereby reducing the number of thorns in this briar patch.

What to do about the panic-stricken student with a poem explication assignment proved to be a more difficult challenge. On the one hand, the assignment clearly intended students to find their own answers. But had the intimidated student been left to his own devices the end product would have merely revealed how woefully inadequate the student felt with poetry. Since the assignment also included step-by-step guidelines on "how to read poetry," the assignment's purpose was to help students in developing poetry reading skills in addition to discerning skills they had already acquired. Ideally, a tutor's function in this situation could be limited to asking a series of circumspect questions designed to help the student clarify the explication process as suggested by the guidelines. But when a student is thoroughly intimidated by a task, the circumspect approach is not always feasible. This is the point at which a clear sense of the writing center's mission is critical. If a center's purpose is merely to facilitate a student's ability to write, a tutor should probably do no more than ask questions. For us, the task of helping students be better writers means sometimes helping them be better readers and students as well. But this poetry assignment wasn't even just a reading problem for our student; it also required considerable problem-solving skills. Questions alone would have left the student stranded, but a combination of questions, modelling, mirroring--all the techniques we employ in writing centers--as well as a hint or two, enabled the student to break through his mental block.

The Wheaton tutor's honor code mentioned earlier would label such tutoring practices as intellectually dishonest because some answers were offered, even though minor. However, this view is severely myopic. As Irene Lurkis Clark explains, in more than one article, the ideal of a writer seeking an individual truth is a romantic notion to which the humanities cling, but we ask advice and suggestions from one another, and we render ideas freely nonetheless. In the sciences, collaboration is the norm as the multiple authorship of articles testifies. These dialogues, Clark stresses, take place between members of the same community--among colleagues--which is not usually the case between tutor and tutee. As Clark astutely observes, "only teachers, not colleagues, ask questions to which they already know the answers" ("Collaboration" 11). Therefore, it is ethical to hold students to a higher or tighter definition of plagiarism than we as professionals adhere to. True collaboration, then, is not the problem; rather, the problem is whether we classify the results from the hybridization of collaboration and teaching as plagiarism. We do not, but then we define our role as a teaching one as well as a collaborative one.

A writing center's policy may be sound, but new permutations constantly test its effectiveness. As tutors we try to inform students about the nature of plagiarism and the gravity of the offense. Caution could be said to be our byword when it comes to dealing with these situations--both in terms of dealing with the student and in terms of leaping to conclusions. In the case of the overheard conversation (sounds like a Sherlock Holmes story), we would probably do nothing. For one thing, while the snatches of overheard conversation might sound suspicious, obtaining real evidence of plagiarism would be difficult. Just as colleagues discuss ideas, so do students. If the collaboration has slipped into the appropriation of language--the clearest indication of plagiarism--we as tutors are unlikely to have the two papers in front of us to compare. Furthermore, by the time our suspicions have become aroused, we are unlikely to even be working with one of the students in question. If we should be so lucky, however, as to be working with one of the students, the best we could do is to explain gently what plagiarism is and how noticeable it is to a teacher. (And I say "gently" because students often do not have a well defined sense of what constitutes plagiarism.) If the two papers do closely echo one another, the teacher for whom the assignment is written should notice.

More problematic is the situation where it is clear that a student has neither adequately paraphrased nor credited the source. Worse, the material may be bald plagiarism. Often these situations arise in the case of ESL students, some of whom may come from cultures where it is perfectly acceptable to get the answers from a source without acknowledgement. For them, the educational emphasis has alway been obtaining an answer, so it is a novel concept for them to worry about crediting a source. In addition, sometimes the frustration of operating in a foreign

language makes the temptation of appropriating language too great to resist. In such cases, we again explain the concept of plagiarism (or read them the riot act--whichever is appropriate) and try to work with the students on paraphrasing skills. Beyond this, we tutor so as to help the student move toward Standard English, but we do not blur the distinction between the very different qualities of voice in the paper. It is the student's ultimate responsibility to eliminate the plagiarism, but should the student attempt to fool a teacher, it will not be with our help. We do not go so far as to inform a teacher that there is a problem for a variety of reasons, one of which is that it is not our function to be plagiarism cops. Furthermore, we are dealing with a work in process, not a finished product, so any comment about plagiarism to a teacher would be premature and quite possibly unfounded. Finally, if a tutor were to become an agent for the teacher in this instance, the honesty that the privacy of the tutoring session encourages would be severely hampered, if not destroyed.

The tutor-tutee relationship outlined above involves mutual respect; a tutor tries to inform, guide, and help a tutee and does not assume the mantle of "cop." However, if the honesty of that relationship is violated it can be appropriate for the tutor to adopt more aggressive strategies for dealing with the situation. In one instance, a tutor noticed that the student's language and information suddenly and drastically improved in one portion of the paper. The tutor asked if material from a source might have been used and not paraphrased well enough. The student claimed both language and ideas as his own to which the tutor responded, "You're lying." When the dust finally settled, the student admitted that, in fact, he had blatantly plagiarized. The student's sin here is not so much in plagiarizing as in violating the mutual trust and respect that make good tutoring relationships possible. Before any further tutoring could occur, tutor and tutee had to come to an understanding about their respective roles and responsibilities.

Even mundane policies should reflect a writing center's philosophy. While we encourage students to make tutoring appointments (which helps them to schedule their time and efforts), if they miss two appointments without informing us in advance, we don't allow the student to schedule appointments for the rest of the term. Respect for others and personal responsibility are components of our center's philosophy. So are the ideas of collaboration and teaching. The length of our tutoring sessions, for example, and the cap on the number of sessions a student can attend each week all stem from how we as tutors see our roles and how we understand the needs of our students.

Because each writing center serves a unique population and derives its definition of what its mission is from its academic context, each center should, I hope, have different, even if similar, policies from those of other centers. Finally, too, the policies should be deliberate and purposeful and not just be the result of tradition or conformity to some abstract ideal.

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